

PARTNERSHIP

In October 2000, the American Society of Landscape Architects and the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program formalized, through a Memorandum of Understanding, a five-year partnership to help communities across the nation "plan, design, and manage their natural, cultural, and recreation resources."

The mission of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) is to lead, to educate and to participate in the careful stewardship, wise planning and artful design of our cultural and natural environments. Landscape architects strive to realize a balance among preservation, use and management of the country's resources. Members of ASLA have volunteered their skills, individually and as part of the organization's community stewardship program, to many projects throughout the nation, such as neighborhood playgrounds and gardens, environmental education centers and Habitat for Humanity houses.

The Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA) is a partnership program of the National Park Service with offices throughout the country. RTCA staff work with community groups and local, state and other federal programs to conserve rivers, preserve open space, and develop trails and greenways. RTCA helps local coalitions develop concept plans, build partnerships to achieve community-set goals, engage the public's imagination, and identify potential sources of funding. All RTCA projects are result-oriented, with an emphasis on community initiative, cost-sharing, and cooperation.

The ASLA/RTCA partnership provides landscape architects with opportunities to work with communities and raise public awareness about their profession through pro bono technical assistance on RTCA conservation projects. In turn, RTCA is able to sponsor professional design expertise otherwise unavailable or unaffordable in these community-based efforts.

Transforming the national partnership agreement into regional action, the Northern California Chapter (NCC) of ASLA joined forces with RTCA's Pacific Great Basin Support Office to assist the community of Santa Cruz, California in fashioning a long-term plan for restoration and enhancement of the San Lorenzo River and Branciforte Creek as they flow through the heart of downtown. The goal was to help develop an "Urban River Plan" that encourages the community to embrace the river and surroundings, identifies access points, enhances transportation and recreational opportunities, provides an image distinctive to Santa Cruz, augments the existing pathways and landscape features, and addresses a host of safety concerns.

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"ASLA is honored to assist the National Park Service in its efforts to help communities accomplish their goals and complete projects that make communities strong, vibrant, healthy places for citizens and families to enjoy."

Janice Schach,
ASLA Past President

EMBRACE THE RIVER:

A Design Workshop for the San Lorenzo River & Branciforte Creek



Santa Cruz, California

2002

A Partnership Effort of the

National Park Service, Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance Program

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American Society of Landscape Architects, Northern California Chapter

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City of Santa Cruz, California



National Park Service
Rivers, Trails & Conservation
Assistance Program

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Pacific Great Basin Region



American Society of
Landscape Architects

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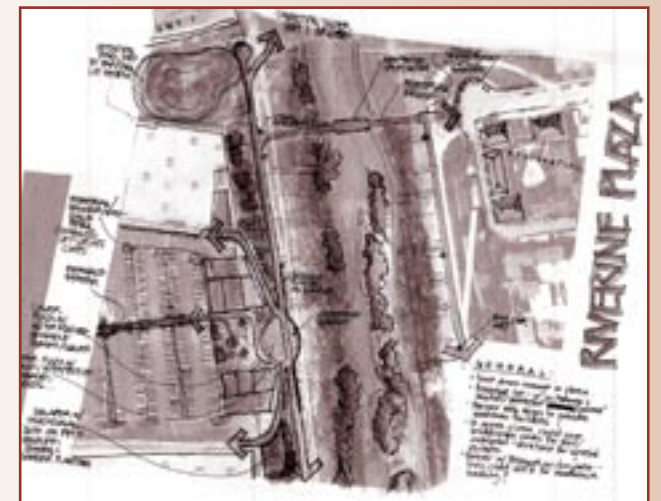
Northern California
Chapter

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COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE

In January 2002, a highly creative, dynamic and productive three-day design workshop was held in Santa Cruz, California. Member volunteers from the Northern California Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects joined the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program's staff, graduate students in landscape architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, local resource specialists, public artists, and community members for Embrace the River: A Design Workshop for the San Lorenzo River and Branciforte Creek. The team worked hand-in-hand to quickly grasp the challenges and opportunities the project presented, and then devise and illustrate solutions for them. The objective was high creativity and productivity. The intensity of the process, in combination with the outsiders' fresh eye for detail and character, yielded a wealth of new ideas.



EMBRACE THE RIVER:

A Design Workshop for the San Lorenzo River & Branciforte Creek

The fates and fortunes of the City of Santa Cruz, population 54,000, have been intertwined with the San Lorenzo River for well over 100 years. The City established itself on the riverbanks throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, incorporating in 1866. The young city used the river, as did most California settlements during that era, for waste disposal and as a water source for agricultural uses. Houses and commercial establishments faced away from the river, treating it as a backdoor alley to be ignored, even avoided. Increasingly crowded out of its floodplain, however, the San Lorenzo River delivered regular reminders of its powers, dumping floodwaters through the developing town about every ten years.



The San Lorenzo River drains 137 square miles of densely forested watershed on the Central Coast of California into the Pacific Ocean at the north end of Monterey Bay. Santa Cruz sits astride the lower 3 miles of the river, encompassing much of the historic floodplain. Branciforte Creek, a main tributary to the San Lorenzo, meets the river approximately one half mile upstream of its mouth. Branciforte Creek drains just over 17 square miles and includes a large tributary called Carbonera Creek. The San Lorenzo once supported the second largest steelhead fishery in central California.

1955 signaled permanent change for the San Lorenzo River. A disastrous flood in December, the largest on record, devastated the City and resulted in a request to the Federal government for a federally funded flood control project for both the San Lorenzo River and the lower one mile of Branciforte Creek. In 1958, work commenced on the San Lorenzo River Flood Control Project that channelized the lower 2.5 miles of the river within earthen levees. A service road was built on top of the levees. The lower one-mile of Branciforte Creek was also channelized into a 35-foot deep cement box culvert.



Both projects were designed to give the City of Santa Cruz 100-year flood protection. With later levee improvements in 2000-2001, the service road was enhanced to incorporate pedestrian and bicycle use.

Although the San Lorenzo River flows through the heart of Santa Cruz, channelization removed it, physically and psychologically, from the fabric of community life. Cut off from its natural floodplain and stripped of its riparian vegetation, the river's ecological health has suffered. No boating or swimming is permitted. A large homeless population seasonally camps in the river. Despite these problems, however, at public workshops organized around this planning effort, community participants expressed appreciation for their river and interest in having more access to it.



Embrace the River: A Design Workshop for the San Lorenzo River and Branciforte Creek

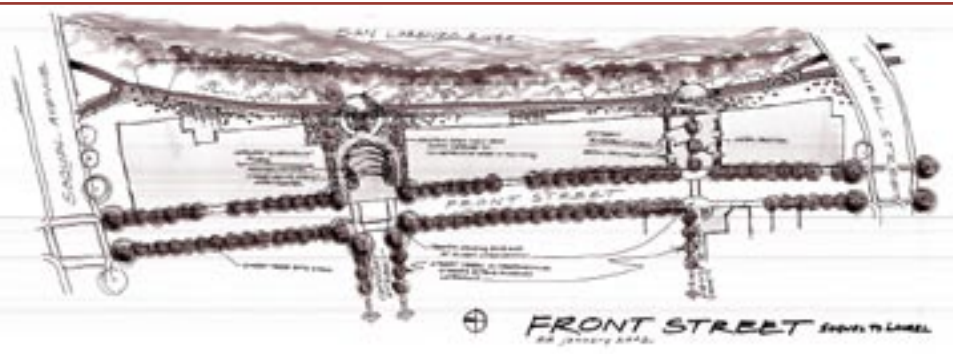
focused for three exciting days on the three mile stretch of the San Lorenzo River as it flows through town, the lower mile and confluence of Branciforte Creek, and the river mouth. After a quick review of background materials, the team took a guided tour of the planning area. Representatives from the Police Department, Downtown Association, San Lorenzo Urban River Plan Task Force, and others with information to share met the team at various points along the route. A group dinner, sponsored by the City of Santa Cruz, a warm welcome from the Mayor, and a slideshow highlighting the San Lorenzo's history, capped the day.



On day two, the team split up: Team A was asked to identify ways to energize and enhance the current built environment; Team B was asked to stretch the limits of current thinking and land use along the river corridor. Facilitated by RTCA staff, the teams quickly analyzed the river corridor, developed opportunities and constraints maps, identified resource and recreation connections, and tackled such issues as future land use, aesthetics, and recreational and safety needs. The teams then presented their work to City staff and Task Force members invited to critique the day's progress.



On the third and final day, the team subdivided again. The landscape architects formed a group to develop an overall conceptual plan for the river corridor, conceptual designs for specific areas, and design standards for site amenities. A group of planners discussed policy and programming ideas. A third group developed ideas for public art along the corridor. Wrapping up, the groups presented an impressive array of work to an appreciative Mayor, City staff, and Task Force members.



RESULTS

Embrace the River was successful in creating a conceptual plan that: (1) addresses transportation and recreation needs and access points, (2) enhances public use areas along the levee trail and (3) provides ideas for enhancing public safety and programming community use. The overall concept identifies the river as a signature space for the City of Santa Cruz - a "charm bracelet" of sorts that invites users to discover the river and its environs as they travel from one "charm" to the next. Highlights of the workshop results include:

- **An integrated and continuous trail system with consistent paving materials and design standards.** The river and levee system transform from a flood control channel to an aesthetic and safe community amenity with connections to adjacent development and neighborhoods. Additional access areas-distinguished by paving, seating, and signage--let the visitor know they have arrived at a particular destination and serve as another unifying feature in the trail system.
- **Enhanced lateral connections to the downtown and neighborhoods.** Because the levee creates a visual barrier and dedicated access points are infrequent, people need help finding the river. Landscaped street connections, water features and existing parking lots transformed into public river plazas extend the concept of the river into the downtown. New development must provide river-oriented access.
- **Focus areas that enhance and integrate with the river corridor.** Essentially the charms of the bracelet, these areas serve as access points, gathering spots and additional recreational areas.
- **Programming ideas.** Programs might include a "First Day" festival to celebrate the river on New Year's Day, establishment of a River Center, and use of the Gateway Plaza-recommended to be renamed the Riverine Plaza-- for the farmer's market, performances and other community events such as an autumn willow harvest festival, when willow cuttings could be turned into seasonal riverside sculpture.
- **Modification of city policies and ordinances.** Future land use policies and regulations must address the river and levees as part of adjacent development instead of as an isolated flood control feature. Redevelopment plans should include guidelines for connecting to the riverway, and key parcels should be identified for acquisition. Existing ordinances banning water-based recreational uses should be re-examined for the possibility of allowing non-motorized boating.

The outcomes of the workshop will be integrated into the San Lorenzo Urban River Plan, a twenty-year vision for a community river parkway with wildlife habitat, recreational and public access features, transportation enhancements and public art. The Plan will be adopted in late 2002 by the City Council and incorporated into appropriate elements of the General Plan update.

- For further information about the *Embrace the River* design workshop or the San Lorenzo Urban River Plan call:
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